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No consensus ever has been reached in the attempt to define the number of Shakespeare's history plays, nor is there yet any general agreement among Shakespearean scholars regarding the constitutive elements of the history plays as a genre of Renaissance drama. Accordingly, though many critics have been convinced, intuitively, that plays such as *King Lear* and *Anthony and Cleopatra* are not genuine history plays, in the past there have appeared few persuasive arguments for excluding these and other plays from consideration as representative examples of the class of play known as the "history." Scholars lately have recognized, though, that it is essential to define the genre in detail before one can argue for the inclusion of any particular play within that genre. The history play, however, lacking any classical precedent, has proven elusive of definition.

When Samuel Taylor Coleridge asserted that "in order that a drama may be properly historical, it is necessary that is should be the history of the people to whom it is addressed," he provided a critical basis for the exclusion of Shakespeare's Roman plays from classification as histories, but he did not succeed in forming a definition comprehensive enough to exclude plays like *King Lear, Macbeth,* and *Cymbeline* until he wrote that "There is as much history in *Macbeth* as in *Richard (II),* but [the distinction depends upon] the relation of the history of the plot. In the purely historical plays, the history informs the plot...in the rest, as *Macbeth, Hamlet, Cymbeline, Lear* it subserves it" (221).[1]

In an effort to be more precise, Lily B. Campbell has attempted to forge a distinction between the tragic and historic genres by appealing to her conviction that tragedy's attention is limited to individuals, whereas history's attention is concentrated upon the workings of the state. As she writes, "Tragedy is concerned with the doings of men which in philosophy are discussed under politics" (17).[2] Such a definition, however, for all its improvement upon the vagaries of Coleridge, yet does not help us better classify such a play as Christopher Marlowe's *Edward II.* Can we declare, for example, that the subject of *Edward II is* Edward II? If so, does this mean that *Edward II is* a tragedy and not a history play? Or, if the subject of *Edward II* is not

Edward II, does this mean that *Edward II* is not a tragedy? The matter truly is ambiguous. Consequently, given this and similar examples, Professor Camphell's distinction does not seem especially serviceable or of particular assistance to us. It is in an attempt to address such ambiguities as these that Irving Ribner has challenged such theses as Campbell's, contending that

> although modern antics often have attempted to distinguish between the history play and tragedy as mutually exclusive dramatic genres it impossible to do so. History and tragedy, in fact, are closely allied to one another, and what is more, we find them so linked almost as far back as we can follow Western civilization. (26)[3]

Ribner does not suggest by his remarks that there is no distinction between tragedy and history, however, nor does he presume the relationship of tragedy to history to be inseparable. Though possessive of tragic dimension, *Richard III* clearly is not the same type of play as *Hamlet* or *Othello,* and it would seem unintelligent to attempt to affirm a generic alliance between plays as distinct as *3 Henry VI* and *Coriolanus.* Ribner's point, rather, is that Campbell's distinction between tragedy and history is extreme, artificial, and inadequate because it lacks universal applicability. Yet, if we accept Ribner's critique, affirm the inapplicability of any doctrine which proposes an easy division between history and tragedy, and still feel uncertain of what we mean when we speak of a "history" play (rightly lacking the confidence to say what a play is, merely by observing what it is not), a review of what English society believed about history and drama prior to and contemporary with the emergence of Shakespearean drama is necessary.

The Rise of the English History Play

In 1950, A. P. Rossiter outlined the development of the English history play, tracing the origin of the history play to the ancient tradition of English folk drama and the medieval miracle play. Ribner's observations concur. He notes that this folk drama "depicted historical event by means of action and dialogue," but he concludes that it was incapable of attaining "the didactic, philosophical and political scope [of] the mature historical drama" (31); Rossiter, however, interprets the English folk drama principally to be the dramatic reflection of a popular, fingering affinity for celebrations of the rites of nature and fertility in a culture—newly Chnstianized—wherein such pagan

entertainments were officially condemned and their participants censured (42).[4]

Ecclesiastical prosecution notwithstanding, the folk drama flourished during the eleventh and twelfth centuries in England, and though the folk dramas gradually assumed a more Christian and less pagan character, the Decretals of Gregory IX (promulgated in the thirteenth century) continued to repudiate the folk drama, while the Bishop of Lincoln, as late as 1244, actually endeavored to suppress it as a containment of doctrine and the authority of sacred tradition. The importance of the folk drama, Rossiter and Ribner would likely conclude, is perhaps therefore more to be acknowledged for what it engendered rather than for any significant, enduring, intrinsic merits that it may in itself possess.

The miracle play eventually supplanted the more primitive folk play in popularity, dramatizing and humanizing articles of Christian faith already well-known to the people through the Church's liturgical celebrations of the sacred events of salvation history. M. M. Reese confirms the character of this dramatic evolution, adding that though these miracle plays were, at first, rather simple and undistinguished dramas, later miracle plays assumed a more mature character as they accomplished the gradual transformation from exclusively religious to at least partially secular themes, succeeded in integrating elements of allegory into the narrative, and effectively acquired a measure of plot and episodic structure (67-68).[5] This dramatic evolution hastened the demise of the miracle play as the narrrative form of theatre in England; the miracle play was subsequently replaced by the morality play, which, in its most primitive form (especially in considerations of staging), the later English miracle plays sometimes resembled.

The morality play emerged "in response to the need for plays which, while retaining an essential moral purpose, required fewer actors and less organizations" (68). Dramatically, the morality play succeeded in utilizing a smaller cast than the miracle play (though some plays, such as *The Castle of Perseverance,* employed as many as thirty-five actors). Organization of the morality provided evidence of greater dramatic development than the miracle play, as well. Many of the plays, however, attempted to depict tremendous spans of time in the life of a character, and this effort to so expand the plays' considerations has earned them the distinctive classification of "whole-life" moralities (103). Such ambitious attempts in this regard, as the play, *Mary Magdalene,* revealed the fundamental weakness of the moralities' lack of dramatic integrity as a whole and pointed to their need of such classical

organizational devices as Senecan five-act structure. Typically, therefore, lacking such devices to achieve order, the morality was relatively brief and either confined one's attention to a specific period in the life of an individual or devoted attention to a specific issue, such as death, as does the morality, *Everyman.* Allegory, in any case, echoes Reese, characterizes all of the moralities, as it was the function of such allegorical characters as Temperance, Fortitude, Contrition, and Vice to impart moral truths to the spectators via the embodiment of imaginative abstractions (68-69).

The history play, itself, developed during the Tudor dynasty in response to the closer alliance between religion and politics which attended the rise of the independent nation-state, an absolute monarchy, and a vigorous proclamation throughout Europe of the doctrine of the divine right of kings. As religious and moral questions began to assume a more aggressively political character, it was natural that the morality play should dissolve or assume a form by which these new realities could be explored. As Rossiter writes, "The old allegory of man's duty toward God, within his Catholic and universal Church was narrowed toward the allegory of men's duties as subjects under a God-representing king" (115). The genre of the morality play, therefore, was adapted to address the questions of contemporary life, as these answers were believed to have been revealed in history. Hence, in discovering the purposes of history, as understood by Tudor England, one can more substantially interpret the purposes of the English history play, thereby allowing one to define it as a genre by which such histories as Shakespeare's two tetralogies of English history (the Yorkist cycle and the Lancaster cycle) can be evaluated.

Tudor History and the History Play Defined

Irving Ribner notes that the Tudor doctrine of history consisted of a fusion of Christian and humanist elements of medieval tradition which, together, provided the Tudors with a satisfying philosophy of history (19-24). S. C. Sen Gupta reinforces this observation with his contention that "Tudor historiography had its roots in medieval thought and could not get rid of its medieval heritage, but its outlook was essentially humanist and largely free from the domination of theology" (14).[6] Indebted to, but departing somewhat from Ribner's lead, I would propose that, for the Tudors, the purposes of history might be summarized with reference to seven main points of view—two of which are derived from the medieval Christian tradition and five from the

emerging character of Renaissance humanism. Primary among those perspectives on history which are derived from the medieval Christian tradition are the convictions that history provides tangible evidence of God's sovereignty and realized will, disclosing God's benevolent intentions for man by its revelation of a world that is rationally ordered and governed. Those perspectives more typical of the humanist approach to historical inquiry include the conviction that history reveals the significance of contemporary events by reference to events of the past, teaches moral and political lessons to those observant and studious enough to learn, demonstrates that the preeminent form of government among men is that ordered within the nation-state, provides examples of political disaster as admonitions to unfaithful monarchs and rebellious subjects, and documents itself as the normative discipline to consult for the proper interpretation of political events (24). In short, given the prominence of these features of Christianity and Renaissance humanism in the collective self-understanding of the English nation of the late sixteenth century, one can confidently assert that Tudor England clearly perceived history to be providential, revelatory, didactic, exemplary, nationalistic, and self-authenticating.

As a result, assuring that we are speaking of Tudor England in all respects, we must say that any play which could be identified as one which offers the state as its subject and which dramatizes real or supposed events from the nation's past in order to accomplish, as its primary purpose, any combination (or all) of the above purposes of history is, in fact, a history play.

Working with this definition of the history play, we thereby may safely exclude (as the weaknesses of Campbell's or others' definitions will not permit their exclusion) such plays as *Macbeth, King Lear*, and *Cymbeline* from consideration as Shakespearean history plays, for though these plays are derived, at least in part, from actual or supposed events in British history, they do not attempt to fulfill the aforementioned functions of history as their primary purpose. And, as Reese reminds us,

> The various elements that composed the popular tradition left him [Shakespeare] free to handle historical or legendary subjects in any way he pleased. Potentially political stories of ancient Britain provided him in *Cymbeline* with a tragicomic romance and in *King Lear* with the most inscrutable of his tragedies, but we are concerned here [in the York and Lancaster cycles] with the themes he took from more recent English history,

> and for this he found an existing tradition whose variety and comprehensiveness exactly suited his purposes. (88)

Therefore, given this clarification of form, we may, with confidence, safely exclude such a play as *Richard II* from its occasional classification as a tragedy, for though such a play conforms in many respects with those features of tragic drama defined by Aristotle in his *Poetics,* such a play fundamentally presents us less with a man as its subject than with England herself as object of our principal anxiety ("this blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England / ...that was wont to conquer others / Hath made a shameful conquest of itself" (*Richard II* II.i.50,65-66) In such a play as *Richard II* (and, arguably, Marlowe's *Edward II,* mentioned earlier), we are presented with the trial of the English *nation* through the person of the English *king*; it is England herself which is the subject of these and all authentic history plays, though the *person* of the king—the incarnation of the nation's purpose—is the primary *vehicle* by which the fate of the nation is dramatized.

As we have noted, the history play succeeded the morality play as the normative (though not exclusive) genre of drama in Tudor England, largely because the morality play could no longer ably accommodate the newer philosophical, religious, and political situations which characterized the life of late sixteenth-century England. Another cause, however, of the morality's decline is attributable to the inadequacy of the morality play as a means for communicating and reinforcing the doctrines of the so-called "Tudor Myth."[7] This myth which the Tudors cultivated was an essential component of the religious/political thought of the day, and a few remarks about it merit attention before considering the character of the two great tetralogies of English history by Shakespeare.

Integrally united to Henry Tudor's claim to the throne, which he won upon the occasion of his triumph over Richard III at Bosworth Field, was Henry's contention that the victory which raised him to the English throne was providential; he contended that he alone had been appointed by God to crush the tyranny of Richard and end the War of the Roses (*Richard III* V.v.19-21), and to confirm this sign. he appealed to the example of his marriage to Elizabeth of York, a union which reconciled the two warring houses and established a new dynasty (*Richard III* V.v.29-41). Accompanying this claim, however, was Henry's assertion of a right to the throne apart from any considerations

of Lancastrian ancestry or marriage of alliance. E. M. W. Tillyard states:

> Not only did he [Henry Tudor] claim through his ancestor Owen Tudor...but he encouraged the old Welsh superstition that Arthur was not dead but would return again, with the suggestion that he and his heirs were Arthur reincarnate....Henry sought to extend the fiction by naming his eldest son Arthur; but the unfortunate death of this prince did not prevent other Tudors making the Arthurian claim. (29-30)

Henry VIII's commission of Polydore Vergil to write a history of England that would legitimize his claim to the throne and reinforce the myth of Henry's Arthurian descent resulted, ironically, as Lily B. Campbell reminds us, in a work which appeared during the reign of Henry VIII that challenged the historicity of Arthur and effectively negated the "Arthurian link" as a support for the Tudor claim (58-60). Reese observes that Shakespeare apparently regarded Henry's claim of Arthurian descent as unconvincing propaganda, especially because no reference to such a link ever appears in Shakespeare's histories (45); but Henry's assertion of providential intervention in raising him to the throne in order that he might reconcile the warring houses of Lancaster and York appears, to this reader at least, to have been more favorably received by Shakespeare and by chroniclers such as Edward Hall, a point with which Robert Ornstein, too, agrees (16-20).[8]

Shakespeare's First Tetralogy: History and Theme

F. P. Wilson has suggested that the genre of the history play might be regarded as a unique, Shakespearean creation (108).[9] Though many critics such as Wilson have attempted to fortify this thesis by dismissing the pre-Shakespearean histories as mere "chronicles," a point with which such scholars as S. C. Sen Gupta and Tillyard find themselves in unfortunate agreement,[10] this distinction must be regarded as artificial and, finally, insufficient, especially if we are guided by our definition of the history play earlier set forth. Such a definition should be sufficient to undermine this untenable distinction between "chronicle" and "history," and Wilson's observation, therefore, would seem to address an *aesthetic* distance between the Shakespearean histories and other histories by lesser artists rather than any real distinction of genre.

The early Shakespearean history play incorporated much of the dramatic character common to such earlier histories as Bale's *Kynge Johan* and Legge's *Richardus Tertius,* but Shakespeare also utilized dramatic elements common to the earlier miracle and morality traditions. Primary among those features of the genres which Shakespeare seized upon were the miracle play's providential assumptions and the morality play's use of allegory and pedagogical intent. Reese states: "The morality structure was ideal for the history play. It was already didactic, as history was required to be, and it dealt in allegory, which enabled the dramatist to preach his contemporary lessons under the cover of abstractions" (69).

Shakespeare, therefore, seems to have developed his dramatic style after a rather eclectic fashion, experimenting with the genres of the miracle, morality. and early history, employing some of their assumptions and techniques in his early plays to accomplish new artistic and dramatic results. J. Dover Wilson is incorrect, then, when he says of the *Henry IV* plays, for example, that "*Henry IV*... is in fact Shakespeare's greatest morality play" (14),[11] for though, indeed, all of Shakespeare's histories reflect, in part, the devices and style of those earlier plays which influenced him in his own work, Shakespeare's plays must not be regarded as simple elaborations upon the morality but faithful representatives of the history. By acquiring the didacticism of the morality and adapting its allegorical character to the subjects and events of English history, Shakespeare was able to fulfill not the purposes of the morality play, as J. Dover Wilson suggests, but the primary purposes of the English history play.

The plays of the First Tetralogy (*1 Henry VI, 2 Henry VI, 3 Henry VI, and Richard III)* were youthful productions of Shakespeare, and though some uncertainty remains regarding the dates and order of their composition, the scholarly consensus appears to indicate that they all were composed between 1589 and 1593. Though the plays reflect an unquestionably immature style when compared to the masterpieces of historical drama of the Second Tetralogy, they nonetheless represent a great advance over the more primitive historical dramas which preceded them.

The action of the *Henry VI* trilogy is episodic, following the structural pattern of the morality play. However, Shakespeare unites the classical tradition of Senecan tragedy to this episodic outline, endowing these plays with their characteristic five-act structure which, in turn, is framed by a chorus. The use of stichomythic dialogue (*3 Henry VI* III.ii.24-75), Senecan declamation (*2 Henry VI* V.ii.31-65), ritual drama

(*3 Henry VI* I.iv.66-108ff), and other classical dramatic conventions, accompanied by the incorporation of revenge themes into an atmosphere of horror—replete with spectral apparitions of the dead—reflect Shakespeare's movement beyond medieval conventions into a more mature dramatic form. As Irving Ribner has remarked, the gradual incorporation of such techniques into the Yorkist tetralogy indicate Shakespeare's growing mastery over the structure of his work (99-101). Shakespeare's sophisticated application of the *de casibus* theme (whereby one character's rise is contrasted with another character's fall) to both his Yorkist and Lancastrian plays provides more evidence of Shakespeare's influence by and reliance upon such earlier dramatic successes as *Cambises* to enhance his own efforts (101).

Nonetheless, recognition of any thematic unity in the First Tetralogy is problematic. In searching for this unity, scholars have offered several suggestions. Lily B. Campbell, for example, has proposed that Shakespeare, in both cycles, is merely repeating the propositions of Tudor doctrine derived from dynastic myth (68). She has argued, too, that "each of the Shakespeare histories serves a political purpose of elucidating a political problem of Elizabeth's day and...bring[s] to bear upon this problem the accepted political philosophy of the Tudors" (125). Tillyard has adopted a similar position which argues that Shakespeare's tetralogy is an *apologia* for the Tudor propaganda of the day which proposed that all of England's woes during the reign of the mawkishly pious Henry VI could be attributed to the usurpation of the English throne by Henry's grandfather, Henry Bolingbroke. Tillyard writes:

> What were the sins which God sought to punish? There had been a number, but the pre-eminent one was the murder of Richard II, the shedding of the blood of God's deputy on earth. Henry IV had been punished by an uneasy reign but had not fully expiated the crime; Henry V, for his piety, had been allowed a brilliant reign. But the curse was there; and first England suffers through Henry V's early death and secondly she is tried by the witchcraft of Joan. (65)

Both theories are attractive speculations, but where, some have wondered, is the evidence for either of these positions? Certainly there is a paucity of supporting evidence in the text; references to Richard's deposition appear only three times in the entirety of the First Tetralogy: *1 Henry VI* II.v.63-66, *2 Henry VI* II.ii.18-27; *Richard III* III.iii.9-12—

hardly enough, it may seem, to assert a primacy of theme. And, it might be asked, if Henry V had been spared God's wrath in token of his great piety, why was not his son—arguably even more devout—spared the scourge of God? The assertion, too, that Shakespeare was only a mouthpiece of Tudor ideology seems equally cavalier to some. Robert Ornstein has intimated that were the theory of Shakespeare as a spokesman for the Crown derived from the assumption that Shakespeare was merely repeating the political themes he found in the records of Edward Hall, it would be specious enough, but if it is supposed, further, that Hall's accounts are little more than repositories of Tudor dogma, then the assumption must be especially suspect. As Ornstein attests,

> [t]here is very good reason to doubt that Shakespeare wrote his tetralogies to set forth what Tillyard calls the Tudor myth of history. There is reason also to question whether the view of history which Tlilyard sets forth was in fact the Tudor myth and can be attributed as such to Hall. Certainly Hall was familiar with the moralistic interpretation of the past and refers to it in his Chronicle, but he never acknowledges it as his own. (16)

If, then, neither Professor Campbell's nor Professor Tillyard's position establishes the fact of a legitimate, unifying theme in the First Tetralogy, what might the theme (if there is one) be? A closer examination of the text appears to suggest that little credence can be given to the theory that the sins of Henry VI's grandfather are visited upon the realm of the third generation. Rather, Shakespeare attributes responsibility for the nation's suffering to factious nobles and an indifferent king whose casual dismissal of England's possessions in France confirms the young monarch's astonishing ineptitude:

> King. Welcome, Lord Somerset. What news from France?
>
> *Somerset.* That all your interest in those territories is utterly bereft you. All is lost.
>
> King. Cold news, Lord Somerset; but God's will be done! (*2 Henry VI III.* i.83-86)

The rivalry between Winchester and Gloucester, the discussion between York and Somerset, the conspiracy of Suffolk and Margaret, the

ambition of the Duchess of Gloucester, the treachery of Burgundy, and the rebellion of the commons under the anarchist, Jack Cade—all of these point not only to the advanced state but to the very *cause* of disease in the realm. Reese affirms this too, noting that "the whole of Henry VI is a long-drawn demonstration that internal dissension, caused by a factious nobility, is the greatest scourge that a nation can suffer" (67). To those like J P. Brockbank for whom the infrequent references to Richard's deposition also cannot be credibly defended as the basis for discovering a workable, unifying theme in these plays, the general "frame of disorder" (55)[12] in the tetralogy provides the unifying feature of this tetralogy. Brockbank contends that

> the plays of *Henry VI* are not, as it were, haunted by the ghost of *Richard II*, and the catastrophes of the civil wars are not laid to Bolingbroke's charge; the catastrophic virtue of Henry and the catastrophic evil of Richard are not an inescapable inheritance from the distant past but are generated by the happenings we are made to witness. (64)

S. C. Sen Gupta has recognized that there, too, is no conventional hero in this tetralogy (64), an observation which has been echoed by Tillyard in his statement that "there is no regular hero either in this [*1 Henry VI*] or in any of the other three plays..." (163) And, though their observations be true enough, we ought not be surprised at such a revelation, for no conventional hero *could* appear in an authentic history play if, as suggested earlier, the genre mandates that the hero of the play be the state, not a person. Accordingly, by reviewing the Yorkist plays, we discover, with Edward M. Wilson, that though these plays are peopled with a host of interesting characters—especially the megalomaniac, Richard of Gloucester—these characters are always "seen and approved in relation to a political background" (86).[13] Richard's presence *binds* but does not *create* the unity of the tetralogy. None of the characters finally can he said to usurp the focus of the play which, of course, is the fate of a wounded England itself.

The Second Tetralogy: A Perfected Style

The plays *Richard II, 1 Henry IV, 2 Henry IV,* and *Henry V* represent the individual units of Shakespeare's Second Tetralogy. Composed between 1595 and 1599, the Second Tetralogy focuses, paradoxically, upon the reigns of those kings which immediately

preceded Henry VI and the Yorkist monarchs, Edward and Richard. Also known as the Lancaster plays, due to their attention to the success of the House of Lancaster in usurping the throne of the reigning Plantagenet monarch (and thereby establishing itself as the royal house for over sixty uninterrupted years) the plays of the Second Tetralogy represent a widely-recognized refinement of style and perfected technique by their author.

With the production of *Richard III,* Shakespeare revealed that he, at last, had succeeded in transcending the limitations of the episodic style which had characterized his earlier work, but it took *Richard III* to reveal that he had matured as an artful dramatist and lyrical genius. Though Derek Traversi has mourned *Richard II*'s "conscious literary artifice" (12),[14] other critics, such as John Wilders, have praised the highly formal style of the play as an appropriate...expression of Richard's self-consciousness [which], combined with the formal, ritualistic construction of many of the scenes...may help to convey the impression of the long-established, hierarchical society of medieval England, now in its final years of decline" (17).[15] In this tetralogy, beginning with *Richard II,* Shakespeare documents that decline and also creates his first great tragic character who, it might be argued, becomes a royal metaphor for an England that is to tumble into chaos, only to be rescued after painful strife.[16]

The Lancaster plays, according to Ribner, "comprise a unified tetralogy devoted to the triumph of the House of Lancaster (151). The conclusion may appear to be deceptively obvious, but it is, nonetheless, an accurate statement defining the thematic unity which forges the plays of the Second Tetralogy into a unified whole. Whereas the movement of the First Tetralogy proceeds from bad, i.e., England's loss of the warrior-kirig, Henry V ("Hung be the heavens with black, yield day to night!" [*1 Henry VI* I.i.l]) to worse, i.e., England's torment under the tyranny of Richard III who made "poor England weep in streams of blood" *(Richard III* V.v.37), the Second Tetralogy opens with a disquieting look at a king who is dangerously weak ("The skipping King...carded his state / Mingled his royalty with cap'ring fools..." [*1 Henry IV* III.ii.60-64]), but the tetralogy closes with a fanfare of tributes to the victorious "star of England" (*Henry V* Epi., 6) who conquered France and secured the peace of England. Therefore, if the theme which unifies the First Tetralogy is one of *rising* disorder, the theme which unifies the Second Tetralogy is the *resolution* of disorder—a disorder which, following the murder of Richard III, in the words of Derek Traversi, is "no longer confined to the clash of courtly

rivalries [but which], spread[lng] from these,...cover[s] the nation's life..." (3).

The Lancaster cycle may also provide a unique historical commentary with its suggestion that with the fall of Richard II, the quieter and more secure days of Plantagenet rule have come to an end. A new, more "modern" era has been introduced with the accession of the Lancasters wherein capacity—not just primogeniture—will be considered in evaluating a monarch's right to occupy the throne. Tillyard supports this view (252), and Reese, too, has written that "In some respects, the Middle Ages may be said to have ended with Richard, and although they would not have used those terms about it, the men of the sixteenth century were able to perceive that something had passed which they would never know again. A new order came in with the Lancastrians, a dynasty launched in blood" (227).

The Lancasters, first represented by the capable, though weary, Henry IV ("So shaken as we are, so wan with care..."[*1 Henry IV* I.i.1]), also serve to highlight one particular conviction of Shakespeare which seems supportable by textual evidence: obedience and loyalty are duties which a subject owes his king, regardless of that king's legitimacy (and about their legitimacy the Lancasters certainly had much with which to be concerned). If such a king as Henry IV appears to be an ironic choice for Shakespeare's illustration of this principal, one need only reflect upon the entirety of Shakespeare's depiction of Henry IV in the three plays where he appears: in those plays, it is obvious that Shakespeare's endorsement of loyalty to the *de facto* king does not preclude his critical commentary of him. In fact, as R. J. Dorius has said, judgments in the later histories are kinder to the wastrel Richard than to the politician Bolingbroke, whose usurpation and killing of a king are thought more heinous than all of Richard's folly. Though a trimmer, Bolingbroke cannot weed his own garden, for his foes are "enrooted with his friends...." *(2 Henry IV* IV.i.207) (125).[17]

It is in superseding the unhappy examples of Richard II and his father, Henry IV, that Prince Hal emerges to command the prominent station he possesses in this tetralogy. Richard and Henry had proven themselves to be failures as kings in their own ways: Richard, though legitimate, had been weak and foolhardy (John of Gaunt had said of him, "Landlord of England are thou now, not king" [*Richard II* II.i.113], and the gardener had echoed, "O, what a pity is it / That he had not so trimm'd and dress'd his land / As we this garden!" [*Richard II* III.iv.55-57]); Henry, though more able than his predecessor, had been

tainted forever, despite his pentinence, by the crime of regicide ("Lords, I protest my soul is full of woe / That blood should sprinkle me to make me grow" *[Richard II* V.vi.45-46]). Hal, therefore, is given the opportunity to become England's greatest king by repudiating *both* these models of kingship. It is by studying his maturity as a soldier in *1 Henry IV* and as a statesman in *2 Henry IV* that we are prepared to celebrate his accession to the throne in Act Five of *2 Henry IV* and witnesses his entrance into the apotheosis of kingship in *Henry V.*

Hal nurtures himself as a student of the common man in *1 Henry IV* by sustaining his relationship with Falstaff and Falstaff's low companions, despite their acts of riot and dissolution. Through his association with such creatures of low quality, Hal is tested—and tests himself—by learning the paths of roguery and conspiracy which shall confront him in the magnified forms of villainy and treason when he becomes king. Hal is never fooled by Falstaff, though he frequently finds Falstaff's knavery and sack-inspired wit to be contagious. Aware at all times that Falstaff's nature is more contagion than contagious, however, Hal resists the fat knight's invitations to pleasure and indolence, for he sees anarchy—the greatest threat to a monarch and his kingdom's peace—couched in the seductive temptations to the ease, idleness, and frivolity which dull the eye of vigilance. That Falstaff is never meant to be a mere buffoon or clown—like Feste of *Twelfth Night,* for example—is evident when one sees that Falstaff is fashioned by Shakespeare as an agent of corruption, inspired in large measure by the figure of the medieval Vice. Falstaff is, as Ribner says, "the destructive element, the temper away from virtue...attractive as all vice is attractive" (171). Though Hal repeatedly attempts to reassure us that he has not been beguiled by Falstaff, especially in the scenes of reconciliation with his father, it perhaps requires his rebuke of fellow reveler, Poins, to convince us of his sincerity:

> By this hand, thou thinkest me as far in the devils book as thou and Falstaff, for obduracy and persistency. Let the end try the man. But I tell thee, my heart bleeds inwardly that my father is so sick, and keeping such vile company as thou art hath in reason taken from me all ostentation of sorrow. (*2 Henry IV* II.ii.45-50)

J. H. Walker notes that the Aristotelian model of perfection required that a man give evidence of superior physical, intellectual, and spiritual attainment (158-159).[18] At the Battle of Shrewsbury, Hal proves that he has reached the goal of physical perfection as he

overcomes the rebel leader of the insurrection, Harry Percy, to whom he so often had been unfavorably compared.[19] Hal's triumph over Hotspur also confirms his soldierly ability and nobility of character—which stand in considerable relief against the cowardice and ignominy of Falstaff. Shakespeare illustrates Hal's attainment of intellectual perfection via the Prince's wise embrace of the rule of law, as personified in the Lord Chief Justice (*2 Henry IV* V.ii.102-145). Hal's spiritual regeneration completes his development; the Archbishop of Canterbury describes the event in words reminiscent of the Anglican baptismal liturgy:

> The breath no sooner left his father's body,
> But that his wildness, mortified in him,
> Seemed to die too; yea, at that very moment,
> Consideration like an angel came
> And whipt th' offending Adam out of him,
> Leaving his body as a paradise
> T'envelop and contain celestial spirits.
> Never was such a scholar made;
> Never came reformation in a flood
> With such a heady currance, scouring faults;
> Nor never Hydra-headed willfulness
> So soon did lose his seat (and all at once)
> As in this king. (*Henry V* I.i.25-37)

According to Walter, these events, coupled with Hal's rejection of Falstaff (*2 Henry IV* V.v.47-70), reveal that Hal has attained the requisite character—at least by Aristotelian definition—to assume leadership of the state. He complements this observation, moreover, by arguing that Shakespeare's intent to depict Hal as the ideal English king can be confirmed by reviewing the traditional qualities inherent in ideal kings, as defined by Erasmus and Chelidonius (155ff.), authorities which Shakespeare unquestionably consulted in creating a mythic persona for Hal in *Henry V* and lifting the dramatization of ideas to an unprecedented summit within the genre.[20]

An Organic Link Between the Two Tetralogies?

It would seem apparent that no organic link unites Shakespeare's York and Lancaster cycles. The plays reflect the gradual inclusion and deletion of many dramatic elements, new and old, which indicate that, to some considerable extent, Shakespeare was experimenting

stylistically while composing the plays. Accordingly, the presumption that it was Shakespeare's intent to produce a grand epic of England's glory and travail during the fifteenth century, commencing with *1 Henry VI*, does not seem persuasive if uniformity of style constitutes a criterion for judgment. Thematically, too, there seems to be little cause for urging upon the two cycles a unity which does not appear to exist. Ribner concurs wits this analysis: "Shakespeare's eight historical plays cannot be conceived of as a single epic unit. They are two cycles, written at different times, in different ways, and reflecting two different periods of artistic and intellectual maturity" (156-157).

S. C. Sen Gupta seems to support this finding as well as when he declared that "though there is internal evidence that Shakespeare, when writing his second tetralogy, was mindful of his work in the first...it is also true that there is little similarity between the incidents represented in the two tetralogies" (113). However, he has also stated, in apparent contradiction, that "not only do these eight plays [from *1 Henry VIII* to *Henry V*] form a single whole, but there is...continuous development from one play to another..." (55). Such confusion leads me to refer to Ornstein as perhaps the most able spokesman on the issue:

> The tetralogies are too separate and too different from one another to be regarded as the complementary halves of a single oddly constructed panorama of English history. Each has a distinctive architectural unity that evolves, like the unity of a medieval cathedral, through the wedding of new form and conception old; and each embraces a multitude of unities because it is made up of plays that have their own artistic integrity and individuality of theme, style, and structure. (31)

The history plays are all unique works, and though it is possible that more attempts might yet be made to link the two great cycles in a seamless bond, it is, to my mind, unlikely that such efforts will produce convincing results.[21] Even though many of the plays parade certain political assumptions before us, and though these assumptions may be identifiable as commonplaces of the Tudor philosophy of monarchy, there is, nonetheless, contained within these plays the suggestion that perhaps few ideas, however dear to the regime they may be, are necessarily always true; but then, such is the posture of Shakespeare in most of his work: inscrutable—in large part due not to his inability to *articulate* a consistent philosophy but in his refusal to

identify with any single point of view. For example, though no doctrine of the divine right of kings (by which, in large measure, Tudor absolutism was secured), and though Shakespeare, at times, appears to be a vigorous champion of this doctrine, at other times he seems to challenge its basis in fact. Ribner's commentary on this matter includes his recognition that

> [though] *Richard II* in orthodox fashion loudly proclaims the doctrine of the divinity of kings...[Shakespeare] does so in a dramatic context which exposes this doctrine to the test of its contrary, and what emerges is not a strong affirmation, but a tone of questioning and skepticism. (163)

Inasmuch as preservation of the doctrine of the king's divinity supported the Crown's insistence upon passive obedience, and resistance to the Tudor philosophy of monarchy could, conceivably, be interpreted as treasonous and an invitation to domestic chaos and the resurgence of civil war. Accordingly, it is not surprising that Shakespeare's probing of the philosophical foundations of the monarchy is, at once, both careful and quick to give occasional example of the subject who does place obedience to the Crown above all other obligations—even the obligations of family and the correction of injustice. John of Gaunt, for example, is drawn (out of historical character, I might add) to represent the fidelity of a subject to his king, even though he knows that king to be a harbinger of ruin and the very definition of tyranny and capriciousness. Also illustrative of a subject's duty to his king, though that duty be challenged by the bond of blood between father and son, is Shakespeare's Duke of York before the newly crowned Henry IV, in whom we see no less an act of fealty than that of a father petitioning the king for his son's arrest on a charge of capital treason. Such examples of unshakable loyalty are contrasted, however, with Shakespeare's apparently equally favorable comment upon the efforts made to rid England of Richard III, and it is not with an unqualified disapproval that he seems to regard Henry's deposition of Richard II. Yet, in *Richard II*, in heroic defiance of Henry Bolingbroke by the Bishop of Carlisle? It is a cloudy picture, indeed, of England, the land of fogs, which we see in these plays—and one which resists attempts to dogmatize about the playwright's philosophical and political presumptions.

The questioning tone of the playwright in these plays, however, is not always readily apparent, and it seems that some postures assumed

expressing a particular point of view have been misinterpreted. (Some interpretations of Shakespeare's work, as we all know, engage every fallacy known to criticism and are, by every canon of judgment, confoundedly ridiculous.) In any case, even if we could achieve agreement among scholars which would affirm the politically inquisitive character of these plays, this still does not merit sufficient justification of the contention that it is this questioning tone which unites the tetralogies, for such could be claimed of all of Shakespeare's more thoughtful works—history tragedy, comedy, or romance.

In the absence of any more compelling arguments, I believe that we must adopt the position that though the two cycles reflect certain similarities of form, the plays are best appreciated when studied as successive productions of a maturing genius who had many things to say, not all of which were complementary. Such a resolution, I believe, is more convincing than any arguments which contend that Shakespeare, while drafting these works, was, with deliberation, constructing a panorama of English history which would establish a casual relationship between the deposition of Richard II and the fragmentation and near destruction of the realm in the century following this unfortunate and foolish king's fall.

NOTES

[1]See Terence Hawkins' edition of Coleridge's *Writings on Shakespeare* (New York, 1959) for Coleridge's essay on *Richard II* (219-244).

[2]Professor Campbell's book, better known for its proposition that Shakespearean history is principally allegorical, is well worth consulting for views which, though propagated almost fifty years ago, still invite interest and investigation; *see Shakespeare's 'Histories': Mirrors of Elizabethan Policy* (San Marino, 1947).

[3]Irving Ribner, *The English History Play in the Age of Shakespeare* (New York, 1965).

[4]A. P. Rossiter, *English Drama from Early Times to the Elizabethans* (New York, 1950).

[5]M. M. Reese *The Cease of Majesty: A Study of Shakespeare's History Plays* (London, 1961).

[6]S. C. Sen Gupta, *Shakespeare's Historical Plays* (London, 1964).

[7]See E. M. W. Tillyard's well-known discussion of this national mythology in his celebrated *Shakespeare's History Plays* (London, 1944).

[8]Robert Ornstein, *A Kingdom for a Stage: The Achievement of Shakespeare's History Plays* (Cambridge, Mass., 1972).

[9]F. P. Wilson, *Marlowe and the Early Shakespeare* (Oxford, 1953).

[10]Both Tillyard and S. C. Sen Gupta propose the distinction between "chronicle" and "history" plays (98-126; 1-6), though this distinction cannot be maintained. For reasons already offered, it appears evident that John Bale's *Kynge Johan* and Thomas Legge's *Richardus Tertius* (among others) reflect the genre of the history play as fully, if not as artistically, as does Shakespeare's own *King John* and *Richard III.*

[11]J. Dover Wilson, *The Fortunes of Falstaff* (Cambridge, 1944).

[12]See J. P. Brockbank, "The Frame of Disorder—*Henry VI,*" in Eugene M. Waith's edition of *Shakespeare: The Histories: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, 1965), pp. 55-65..

[13]Edward M. Wilson, "Shakespeare and Christian Doctrine: Some Qualifications," *SS* 23 (1970), 79-89.

[14]Derek Traversi, *Shakespeare: From Richard II to Henry V* (Stanford, 1957).

[15]John Wilders, *The Lost Garden: A View of Shakespeare's English and Roman Plays* (Totowa, New Jersey, 1978).

[16]As Richard himself achieves recognition of personal responsibility for his fall "I wasted time, and now doth time waste me..." [*Richard II* V.v.49], so Henry V recognizes that he is responsible for this usurped crown whose theft he would expiate by completion of his father's penance. (See Henry's prayer at the close of the first scene of Act Four in *Henry V,* the most poignant lines of which are Henry's desperate petition to the Almighty, prior to the engagenient at Agincourt: "Not to-day, O Lord / O, not to-day, think not upon the fault / My father made in compassing the crown!" [II.292-294]) .

[17]See R. J. Dorius, "A Little More than a Little," in Eugene M. Waith's edition of *Shakespeare: The Histories: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, 1965), pp. 152-167.

[18]See J. H. Walter, "Introduction to *Henry V,*" in Eugene M. Waith's edition of *Shakespeare: The Histories: A Selection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, 1965), pp. 152-167.

[19]King Henry, convinced of Hotspur's noble character and his son's lack of same, chides Hal as a poor example of a prince, particularly one who is an heir presumptive:

> Yea, there thou mak'st me sad, and mak'st me sin
> In envy that my Lord Northumberland

Should be the father of so blest a son
A son who is the theme of honour's tongue,
Amongst a grove the very straightest plant,
Who is sweet Fortune's minion and her pride,
Whilst I, by looking on the praise of him,
See not and dishonour stain the brow
Of my young Harry. (*1 Henry IV* I.i.78-86)

[20]For an expanded discussion of this, see my dissertation, *Shakespeare as Anglican Apologist: Sacramental Rhetoric and Iconography in the Lancastrian Tetralogy* (Ann Arbor, 1990).

[21]The theme of England's woe as the consequence of Richard's deposition is perhaps the most popular argument offered in defense of the contention that there is inherent unity of the two cycles, but the argument lacks strong textual support. To some not inconsiderable extent, *all* of the monarch' reigns were substantially influenced by their predecessors, and there is little evidence that Shakespeare sought to portray, in all these plays, a blight on all the monarchs succeeding Richard II (ending with the accession of Richmond at the close of *Richard III),* forced upon them by Bolingbroke's seizure of the throne in 1399. How else, for example, can one explain the triumphant reign of Henry V during this time of scourging by the divine wrath other than to allow that this theme, for all its attractiveness, lacks confirmation by the text? It seems apparent, rather, that each king suffers the consequences of his own folly or enjoys the substance of wise rule according to the extent that each's weakness or strength allows. Reinforcing an Anglican precept that one is responsible for one's own person before God, Shakespeare rejects any notion of inherited guilt (which, of course, is not the same thing as original sin) and depicts man, instead, as singularly responsible for his own fate.

[22]Consult my dissertation, *Shakespeare as Anglican Apologist: Sacramental Rhetoric and Iconography in the Lancastrian Tetralogy* (Ann Arbor, 1990).